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## She's Been This Body Before

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## SHE'S BEEN THIS BODY BEFORE

Men-of-war hang. She fans them away with her arms. But the sting—she goes through with her face. They lift her for treatment on the boat, a steroid shot. She slips under again. Three divers surround, watching for sharks. They see pilot whales ahead. The sky on her back. The network says: inspiring. She markets herself with a rhyming phrase. A peculiar, clear intention. In its blind to swim the straits, Cuba to Florida, she can't hear the dead. They sing to her, tired and stung. Where are you going? She can't ask; she's not perplexed yet. When she loses feeling—her mind says something should be here, off her spine. The doctor or doctors on the boat warn: one more sting and you'll be lost. She drops her purpose. She strokes back in.

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My mother's friend flies down, broken-up. We follow her around the house. She likes to air-dry her body in the morning after a shower or a swim. I have nowhere to put this. So I pedal my legs above my parents' bed.

One night their sound goes wrong. My father's voice. My mother flickers from her laughter—wait, why aren't we laughing? She's a beat behind or ahead. A door closes. Water runs in the kitchen.

I love you unless you lie to me, my father says to us after prayers. My mother smooths this off the bed. In the Ellwood City High School yearbook my father is shorter than his classmates. Involved in groups. In one picture he looks ready to be needed, kneeling by the team. Their mascot is an aching wooden grin.

What happens? My mother's friend doesn't visit again. We still have the hollow fish hanging by the pool. The wind turns it. Yellow jackets nest in its mouth. He ducts this up with tape or sprays—reaching as we stand at the window watching him on the ladder. I know he's stung. I can't see how. I could engage in fiction, make

a conversation about what to do with the fish. Should we spray or tape its mouth. Or take it down. I would be able to hear them, and locate myself again.

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North to Zapiqueras. Two women in a doorway, one in an apron and the other looking down at yellow in her palm. An older man on a bicycle sparrows by. Which is the perfect color, a hillside in the distance. I look harder. A real or fake village set up on a side. Cafes like cafes but at night people disappear in cars. Guns at their backs. I'm carrying a book about this near carts selling candy. Do we eat chicken where?

Dogs asleep under trees.

Yellow chimes yellow in the capital. I see my grandmother all in black walking without her easel. A girl cascading against a wall. Disculpe me. The plaza at noon. The Palace of Justice set outside of how it sits in photographs where they talk about the siege. No movement in the stone. No artist standing across the street with her walkie-talkie, watching the roof.

Okay, now. A chair drops from invisible hands and hangs by a wire against the exterior. How many people stop? It was around eleven a.m. More wornwood chairs, their catapult from a kitchen the artist makes. Chairs for the ones shot dead inside, or the living? Passerby watch the building's wall shift. Now that she's opened time with them like this.

What is duration? Behind the false door in Candelaria we're breaking. Paul sleeps across the room. We check out. Everything isn't better the next day. A dry golden skin is the mealy blanket or dust. And it's cold. This was one of those searing fights I remember as aftershock and fragment. The beginning of our relationship. The end of first year tendernesses fucking against a wall. My skirt and the language— language raining into language. Writing it is the emptied coast after the first wave has receded. Just taking a look. I



won't be long. Paul leaves his socks in the basin dripping? Will you hold me, my body asks but we're too angry.

I'm not angry, he says first. He has reason to be. The artist's team is researching for her next installation, a crack she wants to construct at home then send through a hall. Its absolute offends her. Find out how cracks start, how they surface, she implores her team in my head-drama about this. We catch up with the wedding in the mountains, a white priest in the nave. Half-meat, half-cloud. He's big, someone says, in the church. Our friends have flown him into the mountain to exchange with him.

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Then I ripped us near his face. Comprehending, he gathered himself. Then changed. What are you doing? my voice from the other side of my head where speaking lived. A shock, the little dog we'd found together pawing at my legs. My hand trying to press his wet face back without pressing him back: stay, no, stay. I shut the door.

The door onstage. The great actress tugs her suitcase across. Items spill across the floor. The actor playing Stanley sticks his hands in, deriding her: flinging pearls, silks, lace. I'm eight months pregnant. Paul is next to me. All I want is the bathroom. Black space under red exit signs. No one can move; she's bones and light. Her faceting self. Her character's disastrous thinking. The actress who played Jane Eyre is seated three rows down. I keep looking for her face. My body doesn't fit. He flutters; he kicks.

All it takes is a flick of the key in the lock. The door will open. It helps to know: this is a difficult door. He was working in enamel then. The door opened onto dots and sticks, implosions, candy slicks of aluminum against the wall. The ice cream truck downstairs—wrenched in singing. I was reading without thinking; he would paint. Good coffee down the street. I liked him. When he stroked through and pressed: welding sounds across the hall. A basin at the end where I would run cold water over my wrists: what are you doing? A party on the roof, the roof next door. My friends

were stuck downstairs. He'd made them chicken. I'd met someone else. A man at another party, twenty-seven, stepped into or fell down the shaft.

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It was my turn to be taken apart.

So at recess they sent Katie across the grass. She delivered their message. What do you want to say back? she asked, almost tender. They watched me from the trees.

I tried swimming. They taught me how to turn and breathe. Turn and breathe. But my feet drifted. I couldn't keep them winging. The coach dipped her head in my lane. Something happened; I wrote it down.

I showed her an essay I love. Some people write so well you almost believe, she said knowingly; it's just good writing. She handed the book back. I couldn't shake her view: how right she was, a corner where I crossed the street.

One summer night we ate the Italian cookies in the window. Each one dusted and wrapped. She set fire to a wrapper. It lifted out of my palm, gaining fire, smoldering down the window well where we lived.

I repeat this with someone else. Fire sails through an open window two floors down. Is it out? Oh no. A curtain we're drinking in, calling, some other kitchen. Copper hanging in its green glint. Laughing and yelling across to them: we're sorry, so sorry. No one appears.

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No one will see. My mother is paying at the counter. I reach into the vase. They must be valuable. The store is called The Crystal Palace. I slip one under my tongue.

My mother talks about disappearing. How easy it is. This started at parties her parents threw, watching adults. Their shifts and corners. She wasn't attractive to them yet. Her older sister stood in the foreground, performing. Her younger sister slipped out with boys from town.

In the Crystal River someone films the manatees. Their gray skin, stone flaking into flesh. The world is water and stone, no corners for them, groves where we can drift. They have flats for hands. Pinched, developing faces. The water level looks too low. It's miraculously clear: there are still clear places. Brushing by—my kind of clinging? To be a creature here.

Her creature. She would lie out to complete herself. Now the only way to cure the sun's damage is to sit under a total ray. This will reburn her chest and face. There are too many questions here, the doctor says, reading her skin. Can you imagine if we froze them off, one by one?

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She opens to us, would you all like some tea?

Where's your walker, Mom? asks Paul. She takes his arm where she used to take Jack's. In the casket air shattered his chest. She slipped a message inside. But his face was already sealed. This was called the viewing.

Her grandson toddles to her pantry to bring her, one by one, too much. Sugar. Baking powder. Flour. Thank you, Endy, he says. She mirrors him back. Thank you, Endy. She calls me Amy then corrects. Amy is a blonde woman across the canal. Amy says a spoonful of peanut butter will help one sleep. Does it? Yes. There's a next door and a next. Christmas again.

This means untangling then displaying what's inside. She has to tell us how the objects nestle in. Like this? No. She knows how but he's still too flown from her. Year two. What is grief again? Her privacy in us.



Paul looks everywhere. It's just not here Mom. Please tell me you're not going to get on the ladder when we go. Okay, she responds in a smile. Her sole self. My child, I'm my own in this bind, she doesn't say. Where Paul feels her falling, his trying to get her on the phone. The phone going to the machine. Then the machine again. Her hip. I mean it, he says, I need you to promise. I promise.

I go for air.

Across the street is a lot without a family, palm and pine and brush breaking the house tract in front of the canal. There's a humming. The metal box cooling the house next door? An overgrowth crests and dives—they say they've brought down one of our drones. An image on tv with language running on the edge of the frame. A white thing hatching no one. A man with a notebook walks around, peering. Maybe just for human scale. They say they've jammed its brain. It obeyed, turning to them, descending viewless from the clouds.

His casket was black. You couldn't see with him inside, open in the church. I last saw him on the bed. Paul had come in to wake me up. Aunt Maureen was there with Uncle Ed. She had started in telling half-stories, half-images as we waited for them to take his body away. Speeding through him. So handsome as a young man. That butcher asking him to stand in the window to slice the meat. So he had to stand in front of the store for them. He had to stand it. A window where she knew he had to be.

Meanwhile, Ella makes everyone.

When she doesn't get one of us going or when her wave exceeds the wave she marked herself inside, it takes some time to get her back. Maybe we should go up to the house now, Ella. No. All the houses on this island. The best is being her charge, shooting out of the porch onto the jetty. She asks me for the jellyfish story again.

Each one trailed long broken wires. They looked like just what

you want to look at when you're falling asleep—liquid, motoring. When you're you and you don't know how. You try to keep up. You keep up without trying. What are you doing? You know them from somewhere. The ones closest—then a wave.

The past seeps as I pull its stitching out. I was stung. Dawn helped me to the beach. Part of being with her was listing toward her older brother never coming out of his room, making a sandwich next to his mother at the table. She would look up.

No one watched too hard. Dawn and I watched movies I wasn't allowed to see. Her father made his rounds, surfacing, hello again. His death invisible in his steps. What he would do, how and when. This happened already. Yes says Ella but let's break the next wave with our butts.

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I leave you for the outdoor shower under the house.

If I use this shampoo who will I smell like? The fig tree bracing the yard. Voices attaching in the kitchen above. That's Fannie—I can't tell who else. If I have to leave I should leave now. Water sloughs off sand and salt, my sound body pooling. At my right is a rough, home-made opening to the house next door, dry and empty. Kayaks shucked in the parched grass. Their blue cresting life.

Zero clouds. Wind catches someone doing the puzzle alone. Kirsten arranging all the pieces to the marlin on one side? I hear another body. Our steps above, the kids' bursting steps thinning into ceiling. How wind bends the water into reverie. One black, moldy beam.

We were running across. I had my mother's bowl. She'd washed the berries like she always did, first thing. We put them down on our neighbors' step, knocked, screamed, and raced back to our cottage. Later their noise against our kitchen door. The tail of their laughter, those Tomkinson kids.



Our bowl returned to the step. They had crossed the maple-shadowed grass. Cold in the middle where the cloud would sit before it shifted out. The bowl was filled with glass from the lake. Good pieces. To count as good they had to be worn and useless.

A dull, threading light ground in. These were the best. The adults arched over; what is this game? Deer or wind in the edges. Time for bed.

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Sapphire sudden in the sand.

After the kids go down we drift toward the kitchen table, drinking. One of our friends is a clown. He has a story about the stage. Every time he tries to enter the other clowns thwart him. He retreats. He keeps appearing. They bat him down. Then I couldn't go with it anymore, he says. Everything came out. The other clowns turned then, rolling with laughter, ringing in his wave still simmering on the floor.

This happened once. I opened the library door and saw my residence hall swaying. Some of us weren't moving on the path to class or Pierce. Then the high window of the fraternity ticked. Others stood closer, further, pointing at the stag. Draining. The next ones coming out of the library behind me looked or pressed past, not seeing or seeing a few steps later. One kid in my class I remember exactly how he walked—loping always hurrying away. The smile baked in. If I remember him I remember his friend then I remember a strand of others from that time. The stone path we used and had to use if we wanted to be there.

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It's almost too random to bear. How I meet you, how you travel here. Steaming bowls of collards and shrimp, grilled ears of corn. The singed sleeves. This is the boil: Kirsten and Fannie arrange each dish around, obedient to a kitchen the rest of us don't see. We should do this every year. The beach, Kirsten says, pouring. The

beach. She starts in remembering Fannie to us where she was small. They would have to explain to her anything that was happening in the house by not explaining much.

We sit down to eat. Kirsten sets up a story about Fannie's mom. Then Fannie says no, I'm not going there tonight. Kirsten already lit in the remembering, supernatural off the tongue. An amber shot. Fannie stops her again, not angry, and Kirsten really stops. We do some light work to shift the conversation. Waves in the grass sweep toward the house.

The children sleep.

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We were ignited somewhere else. Not just illusion or memory—the adults arched over. Time for bed.

I couldn't sleep. What should we fill the bowl with next? What do we most want to give them—it had to be something below money where we most wanted to keep. Petoskey stones on the dresser. They changed in water, darkening, raising a loosening matrix where the coral had lived. Each hexagon opening a moment, blurred and bordered by the next. They were wave-born. The glacier had clipped them off bedrock, folding them in. There was no language or landing. Decade after decade of ice, expanding and contracting. Downstairs, the bowl rinsed and tipped over on the rack. Trees shivering, splitting their shadows on the sink.